

Political tricks leave America's veterans behind —once again!

By CONGRESSMAN BOB FILNER
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WASHINGTON, D.C. — It seemed that 2002 was going to be the year — finally! — when we would be able to correct a grave injustice done to our veterans. I sincerely believed that Congress was going to restore a long-denied veterans' benefit known as "concurrent receipt." Unfortunately, something terrible happened in the legislative end game.

Concurrent receipt allows veterans who became disabled as a result of their military service to receive both their VA disability compensation and their military retired pay. But concurrent receipt was eliminated as a cost cutting move. Because of this, America's most dedicated and decorated veterans are now being denied benefits that they rightly deserve.

Here's an example of what happens. Under current laws, a Vietnam veteran with 20 years of military service who is now suffering from Agent Orange-related cancer must now choose to receive either his military pension or compensation for his illness. He cannot receive both!

This is no way to treat those who have sacrificed so much for

our country! Military service requires hard work, mental toughness, and immense personal sacrifice. The men and women who serve our nation in the military risk their lives and limbs in intense and dangerous work. As a result, many of them become injured or disabled.

How can we tell these self-sacrificing soldiers that we are unwilling to compensate them for their years of service and service-related disabilities?

This should have been the year when this injustice was rectified. Instead, here is what happened:

Last year, when both legislative bodies passed significant and appropriate provisions in the Defense Authorization Act to fix the problem, I supported the Senate version, which restored concurrent receipt to all deserving veterans.

As the two versions of the bill were being reconciled into one final bill by a so-called "conference committee," on October 10, 2002, I voted with all my House colleagues to instruct the conference committee members to protect the concurrent receipt provision in their negotiations.

In short, the House passed a bill including concurrent receipt for many veterans. The Senate passed a bill including concurrent receipt for all veterans. The House took an additional step on October 10th so that there would be no doubt about the importance of retaining the concurrent receipt provision in the final bill. But in a mysterious



Cong. Bob Filner

manner still not fully explained, when the final Defense Authorization Act came out of the conference committee, "concurrent receipt" was almost completely obliterated!

I believe it was unconscionable that the "Defense Autho-

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rizers" in both the House and the Senate bowed to veto pressure from the White House and eliminated this important benefit for most of America's veterans who deserve it.

I am very angry about this turn of events! But I am equally angry about the unbelievable process used to pass this final bill! You should be too. And you should demand explanation from your Representatives in the House and Senate!

Here's what happened: The Armed Services Committee, having come to the decision to ignore the overwhelming majorities in both Houses of Congress, put its "conference report" on the House of Representatives agenda late on Tuesday, November 12, 2002, while most Representatives were traveling back to Washington for the post-election "lame-duck" session. We had been assured by our leadership that there would be no votes until the next day!

Imagine our surprise upon learning that the Defense Authorization Act, one of the most important bills of the year, was passed by a "voice vote" — with almost no Representative present! The Senate followed suit and passed the Act by voice vote the following day. Congressman Bilirakis and his supporters were betrayed. The hopes of veterans everywhere were dashed by their own representatives! And the whole crime was carried out virtually in secret!

During my 10 years in Con-

gress, I cannot recall more than one or two other issues on which I received so many letters, e-mails, and calls. The expectations of our military retirees were raised by the House and the Senate versions of this bill. This was to be their year — but at the last minute very little was granted to very few.

The few veterans who are covered in the bill — those with combat-related disabilities or disabilities for which they received the Purple Heart — are absolutely deserving. But so are all the others for whom we have been fighting!

I understand that this important veterans benefit has certain costs. But I also understand that America's now disabled veterans did not hesitate when called to serve their country. They did not let the personal and physical cost of combat stop them from serving. They returned home with disabilities they have had to live with ever since. How can the leaders of this country refuse to keep their promises and give them what they deserve? They earned their military retired pay. They deserve their VA disability compensation. And now they must wait longer for justice to prevail.

Unfortunately, we must go back into battle. But in this new year, we will go back with new weapons and new resolve. We will persevere for our veterans just like they persevered for us. And, like our veterans, we will be victorious!